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## Canary in a Cage and other stories

Jennifer Leah Wegmann

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# CANARY IN A CAGE

And other stories by Jennifer Wegmann

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in the partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2011

Approved by

*Ann Fisher-Wirth*

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Reader: Professor Jack Pendarvis

*John Samonds*

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Reader: Dr. John Samonds

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I dedicate these stories to my sister, Julie—

Who has never let a cage door shut behind her or stop her from singing.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank first and foremost Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth, without her patience and guidance this collection would not exist. My writing in college began with her in Paris, and is appropriately ending with her in Oxford, Mississippi. I would also like to thank Jack Pendarvis, for offering very different criticism than Dr. Fisher-Wirth, but no less important to the process. I would like to thank Tim Earley for support, Brenda Robertson for letting me print hundreds of pages on her printer and Mary Saunders Dawson, whose words of encouragement and enthusiasm are always near and always will be. Finally, I thank Jilly and David Best, Dr. Henry and Leah Dowling and my parents, who financed my adventures that I was able to call research.

## ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories represents my best writing in college. The collection, in theory, began in Paris in the winter of 2009 and continued to travel to Montana, Texas and the French Riviera. It has finally come to an end in Oxford, Mississippi. “Just Going,” follows a woman through a relationship with the man hired to be Santa at the retirement home where she works. “The Kindness of Foxes” is a short, short story about a short, short moment at Rowan Oak at the start of winter. The questions of masculinity and the gendered assumptions of father to son relationships is questioned in “Sons of Abraham,” when a father absent mindedly neglects his youngest son for his eldest. The intricacies and failures of marriage are explored in “Blue Lights.” And the failures of family in “Ducks Imprint the First Thing They See” with the death of a father and the unraveling of the daughters left behind. The title story of this collection, “Canary in a Cage,” follows a young woman as she absconds to the French Riviera in an effort to move on, or at least away, from home and finds momentary comfort in a weekend with a charming British couple. The stories end in Montana with a middle aged man in a strained marriage, who struggles with his feelings with his wife’s visiting niece in “The Dust You Are.”

## PREFACE

The truth was something that existed; it's just that it lived far away.

Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*

I'm taking him home to my little girl. There—he's singing now.

Ernest Hemingway, "A Canary for One"

This collection is based on fictional characters and plots I created from the very real places I have been able to go. Each protagonist seems to be caged by something, and some have even built their own cage. That is the plight of human nature, I suppose, to build walls so others cannot get in—only to realize we have trapped ourselves.

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## JUST GOING

She liked having sex with Santa because it made her feel closer to God. He came this time every year to Paradise Gardens, and she came in the back file room if he let her get on top. Deb had heard about God and his son in church camps she and her sister were made to attend. But she hadn't been to church since college. Once she thought about stealing a bible from a hotel drawer, but decided against it. The folks really loved Santa. Even the old men would sit on his lap. Deb usually didn't go to the Christmas Week Parties. She stayed behind the desk and answered phones. But she could hear the folks laughing. Hear them already forgetting the party and asking her about it tomorrow.

Santa asked the first time they screwed if she had a boyfriend. Everyone asks this. The folks always ask. Deb had been married once. Sort of. Right after high school. And again in her twenties. She lived with him and they shared saltine dinners. She had just started working at Paradise Gardens when they broke up. He decided that sex with a vagina was not as fun as sex with an ass. That is what Deb told her sister, who only called on Thanksgiving.

“He’s a faggot?” Diana said. Diana was the kind of girl who drank champagne when there was nothing to celebrate. She drank gin and tonics on New Year’s Eve in champagne flutes.

“He is not straight.”

“Christ, that sucks.” Diana moved to San Antonio a couple of years ago. She managed parties at the River Walk Hyatt. Once she had met Steven Seagall. Diana was plain, the way Jane Austen novels described plain. But she had huge tits and men liked those. Men didn’t leave women with milk gallon tits for other men.

The folks come to Deb to see if they had any phone calls from grandbabies or great grandbabies. The great grandbabies never called. They didn’t even know that great grandma is in Paradise Gardens. They were too concerned with how Elmer’s Glue looks like snakeskin when you pull it off your fingers. They all asked and she lied every time.

Deb told Santa she had been dating a guy for a couple years after the first time they had sex.

“Oh,” he said. It was after the file room and very late. In Sugarland, Texas Christmas is wet. They decorated the windows all frosty-like. But outside the temperature was warm and thick as mucus. Their cigarette smoke hung in front of them.

“What are you getting him for Christmas?” Santa asked, ashing his cigarette into the foiled base of a poinsettia.

“He collects antique poker chips. I found some neat ones on Ebay.”

“Gambling man.”

“Yep.”

Because Deb smiled at them, the folks, they would bring her Christmas presents. One woman, Gammy Barb, gave her a pink crochet toilet seat cover.

“All girls like pink,” Gammy Barb said. Gammy Barb had children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. They never called. They lived in Dallas and attended the Presbyterian Church on Sundays. Deb wrote Gammy Barb a thank you note on pink stationary she bought at Walgreens. It had neon animals in the corners. She used the same stationary to write a note to Santa. She told one of the other staff members to give it to him. She would be late to the Christmas brunch, which was held a few days before Christmas because no visitors ever actually came on Christmas.

“Is your boyfriend going to come to the brunch today?” Gammy Barb asked.

“I’m going to pick him up now. He’s flying in from Birmingham to spend Christmas Day with me,” Deb checked her wallet for cash. She was going to the doctor. *Do you tip the doctor?* “You can meet him today.”

When Deb returned from her appointment, someone had wet themselves behind the “White Christmas” Christmas tree and the staff was busy moving everyone around the “Twelve Days of Christmas” Christmas Tree. Santa, too, was

helping move punch bowls and generic shortbread cookies to the other side of the room. Deb put her sweater and purse in the storage room she and Santa had been doing it in all week and went out to help.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” Santa said as she arranged the cookies on the red platter.

“I left you a note.”

“Yeah, but sometimes people say they will be somewhere when they won’t.”

“I told you I had some errands. Personal things.”

Santa had to go to his sleigh to get his sack of presents for the folks, Nurse Wattling told them. Nurse Wattling probably knew about Deb and Santa. After four years, how could someone not know? But she didn’t say anything. She had skin tags on her neck and a drooping left eye

“Where is your handsome man?” Gammy Barb asked.

“Snow in Louisville. Plane couldn’t leave.”

“What a shame. I bet it is beautiful. Snow always makes me feel like a little girl.” It hadn’t snowed in Sugarland in twenty years. If Gammy Deb had been in Dallas with her family she might have seen ice.

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The doctor’s office was painted the color of all the tampon boxes in the world. Georgia O’Keefe pictures hung on the walls in case you forgot what exactly

went on there. You do not, in fact, tip the doctor. Especially when they tell you that you are pregnant.

“A Christmas miracle!” the nurse said. Her braces alternated green and red. Deb immediately scheduled an abortion.

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Santa gave each resident of Paradise Gardens an eggshell colored coffee cup that said Paradise Gardens. Deb helped Nurse Wattling vacuum and sanitize the wet spot on the carpet.

“Barb was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. Breast,” Nurse Wattling said.

“Do breasts even work at eighty-four?” Deb asked.

“It isn’t about working. It is about cancer. My aunt had it. She died when she was only forty. Double mastectomy and everything. Took away what made her a woman and she still died.”

Deb watched Gammy Barb. She folded the wrapping paper the coffee mug was in and held the mug to her wrinkled and mutating chest, cold against her cheesecloth skin.

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“Are you feeling alright?” Santa asked after. “Things with the boyfriend okay?”

“Fiancé,” Deb flicked the buckle of Santa’s belt so it sounded like chains.

“Fine. Well. Great.”

“Which one is it?”

“Does it matter?”

“Guess not. Why aren’t you with him on Christmas.”

“He got snowed in in Charleston.”

“Right. Forgot,” Santa said and slid the belt from her hands, the whole length of it like a black snake over her palms. “Charleston,” he repeated. “You want to get coffee? Eggnog? Or you know, a real drink?” Deb watched his hands as he buckled his red velvet pants. The velvet was hot and made his thighs slick by the time he took them off in the back closet. Deb told him she had to stay. Besides they would have to drive to Houston to find a place open that late.

“And you want to be sober and pretty when that fiancé comes from Charleston,” he said.

“Nashville.” Deb buttoned her blouse. They could hear the mini fridge hum low and it made Deb feel tired.

“I guess I need to get back to the sleigh. A few more countries to tonight and deliver lumps of coal.”

They did not touch. If they had been in a movie he would have kissed the soft part of her wrist. But he did not touch her.

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It was the pain that woke her up. The blood on Deb's sheets looked black, but on her hands it was as red as poppies and smelled like pennies. She got in the shower and cleaned the stains on her body, where it butterflyed across her buttocks and down her thighs. She got on her knees and dug her nails into her thighs. Membranes ripping open, her body felt like it was inverting itself. She found a small sac that came from her and now clogged her shower drain. Deb flushed it down the commode and felt nauseous after. She used the pink toilet cover to dab at the dark shapes on her bed. Deb took some muscle relaxers and washed them down with tap water, and called Diana but only got her answering machine. Deb didn't know what other actions to take after this. Diana's voice sounded chipper and too high pitched, which made Deb choose not to leave a voicemail. God must have known she was going to send the fetus and herself to hell and thought it was better to rid of it himself. The fecundity of her body had been surprising to her, maybe it was a joke. Like her womb was laughing and pointing.

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Santa had to tell Deb it was him. He shaved when it wasn't Christmas season, he told her. They were standing in the indoor pool room at the YMCA. Deb had joined because she read swimming was good for a body. His face was

smooth and pink, like calamine lotion. Santa was still wet from his swim. His brown nipples were visible through his white shirt. They didn't hug, but she could smell the chlorine and baby pee on him from his swim. She mentioned the many shopping bags he had with him.

“My son's staying with me this weekend. The manager let me keep them in the fridge in the back. Buddy of mine.”

Deb didn't know he had a son. She knew he had sparse hairs like Orion's Belt on his back.

“This weekend.”

“Yeah. He's eleven. Used to only eat omelets. Every meal, omelets. Then some punk kid at school told him eggs were chicken periods. Now he won't eat anything with egg in it. I don't think he's got a clue what a period is. Do you know how much stuff has egg in it?” Deb laughed because it was polite and true. A chubby couple floated by in the leisure pool on their backs like otters. They were holding hands. Their stomachs and faces swelled above the waterline. Santa said it would be nice to see her outside of Paradise Gardens. She agreed. They parted and Deb took her cover-up off as she walked to the pool. Jumping in, she did a cannon ball that sent pool waves over the chubby couples' bellies and faces. The man submerged and the woman snorted water from her nose making a fuss. Deb saw the chubby man when she went under. He flailed his arms and legs and swam back to his sputtering wife, his white beluga body rippling in the water. Deb counted to twenty-three, hoping Santa had made it to the parking lot by then. She cancelled her membership at the Y that afternoon.



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When winter ended, Deb quit Paradise Gardens. She applied to work at various shops along a strip center off the freeway. One that sold different kinds of barbeque sauces and salsas from a ranch near Dallas, and another that sold movie paraphernalia. There was a gardening store next to the sauce store she went into after dropping off her application. The women had big hair and beaded chains that held their glasses around their neck when they weren't on the bridge of their noses. When one of the women asked if she needed help, Deb said she was just looking. There was a display of lawn gnomes and concrete fairies to set around flower beds.

Christmas items were on discount, but looked very picked over. The only things left were shiny plastic balls and a manger scene that was missing everything but Joseph, a sheep, a wiseman, a little drummer boy and the baby Jesus. Diana was coming to visit. Deb called her after Valentine's Day with the intention of telling her about the incident with Santa. The miscarriage, not the YMCA pool. Diana was excited to come and asked Deb to schedule manicures for them.

"I have so much to tell you. This trip will be good for me, I need to get out of town for a little bit," Diana said. Deb decided not to tell her about Santa. Since then, Deb was trying to make her home nicer. Gardening seemed a good way to

do it, and she bought a bag of bulbs from the store. The woman told her the flowers would bloom by April and to make sure to water them gently everyday.

“It’s kind of like a relationship, gardening. It must always be tended to with love and care,” she beamed, proud to impart wisdom.

The next afternoon, Deb knelt in the black earth and dug holes for the plants. She pulled the weeds and set them in a pile, thinking the pile looked like an animal’s den. The wet soil stained the knees of her jeans. Sweat prickled like insects down her back. She pushed the bulbs into the ground with her thumb, the dirt bedding under her nails. Russian hydrangeas. Dutch Tulips. French lilies. She only wanted foreign flowers so they would make her feel exotic when they bloomed.

## THE KINDNESS OF FOXES

The three of us, Roy, Stephan and me, stared at the entrails of the rabbit outside of Rowan Oak. Snow was coming that night so the grey and fleshy viscera would be gone by the next morning.

“A wolf. Coyote. A fox, maybe,” I said when Stephan asked what ate the rabbit but left the intestines and hind legs. Separated, no less. A fine butcher of a carnivore.

Roy nodded when I said, “Fox.” It was more romantic that way.

A red shock of fur with the white-tipped tail jumping through the wooden slats of the fence. I didn't feel sad for the rabbit and his long pointed feet, uneaten. Maybe I should have. But I only thought of the fox. One that Faulkner himself might have watched from the kitchen window.

“Feel how cold my hands are,” I said to Roy, hands outturned as if to accept something. He grabbed the padded part of my middle finger. It made him uncomfortable to touch people.

“Do you need to go in?”

“No, just cold hands.”

Roy and Stephan continued to talk of the wrinkled parts before us. I laughed out of embarrassment of the gore and our fascination, the swollen organs left behind. I knew of a death called rabbit starvation. People could die from eating only rabbit meat—as people in far away places did in a harsh winter—it was so lean it didn’t have enough fat to keep a human alive.

The fox, somewhere, was full and warm. How quick and lovely foxes moved. I had seen a few before—a fox looked like the strike of a match moving through green grass. Not even through grass, across it.

A flame across the tall grass.

## SONS OF ABRAHAM

The ice that clung to the dirt and the dead grass silvered the ground, which was hard with the cold. It smelled like a fire in a neighbor's backyard, as winters are supposed to smell. Ben rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stared at the men around him. A few passed around a dingy flask and even fewer grimaced after a pull from it. One, despite it being just over four in the morning, smoked a cigarette. Ben knew his father would smoke a cigar later because he used his father's hunting vest as a pillow during the car ride and felt the aluminum tubes in the breast pocket. He knew he would hear his mother complain about the smell days after his father smoked them. The vest itself always smelled of cigar, though, and dirt and sweat. Real sweat. The kind Ben associated with men and that seemed so far from him and the few things that he knew. Like how hairy and broad and voluminous the men were standing before him, drinking before the dove hunt.

"Bennyboy, you ready for this?" his father asked. One man spit into a

plastic cup he tied around his neck with a string. He ran his tongue over his teeth and it made a sharp spitty noise.

"Yep," Ben said. His father, John, patted his shoulder.

"Y'all got any coffee at the place?" his father asked.

"It's be like mud if we did. We've got whiskey, though. Warms you up the same," the man turned to pass John the flask.

"No thanks," John said.

Early that morning, John had woken Ben up by nudging him. John stood in the doorway, politely facing outward while his shadow stretched across Ben's floor and slanted upwards along his bed.

"Don't forget long johns and an extra pair of socks," his father said into the hallway. Ben liked that his father wasn't helping him get dressed. He liked that his hunting gear felt gritty and had stains on it from when his brother used it before him. He had laid out his clothes before he went to sleep. Right down to his underwear, which may or may not have been dirty. It was his first time to go hunting and his brother wasn't coming. Ben's brother and father had gone together many times without Ben, but today Ben would be the one coming home with the stories of their day and dirt on his face.

Out of the truck under a cluster of trees with a small three walled blind, Ben was glad for the long johns. Glad for the men standing near him. Glad when he was handed his grandfather's shotgun. It was hard and heavy but no one said anything about him being able to hold it. All the men had mustaches, like his

father. But theirs were messy and some were even yellowed under their nostrils and near the edges of their lips. John kept his clean and trimmed it Sundays before they went to Mass. Ben didn't know what his father's upper lip looked like.

"Y'all from Nashville, right?" one man with a green hat asked.

"Yes. I have another older son and a daughter. But today is Ben's first hunting trip." The men grunted and nodded with approval. The man with the red bandana spit on the ground. He'd left his cup in the car. Each mentioned something about their first hunting trip, Ben would realize later they were likening it to the first time they had sex. He didn't understand the humor except for the word "peckerwood," so he kept his head down and felt his face heat at the adulthood of it. The frozen ground in front of them stretched out like a sheet pulled taut over a mattress. A pond stood still and open as if the mouth of the field had opened and forgot to close while sleeping. Scattered around it were dead stalks of grass that, too, were spotted with frost.

"What grows in that field out there?" John asked.

"That field is for growing dove," the guide responded without looking up from checking his gun.

"Growing dove. You sonofabitch. 'Cause you bait the damn thing, you bastard," the man with the red bandana laughed.

"The boy hasn't been dove hunting before and we are going to show him a damned good time, ain't we? Listen," the man turned to Ben and looked at him directly into his pupils, "When we call 'bird,' you shoot. When we call 'low bird,' get that finger off the trigger. We don't want to spray anybody's ass around here.

You and your daddy are going to stand right around here and the rest of us ole farts are going to spread around the edge of this field. They'll be flying from over here," he pointed towards a far edge of the pond, "and they will move right past ya." Ben nodded as the man swept his arm across the sky.

Peter, Ben's brother, said he really liked hunting and that Ben might like it, too. He killed a small buck and a few raccoons at a friend's ranch. They weren't allowed to touch the raccoons, Peter relayed, because they might have rabies. Peter told Ben about hunting when he was watching him one afternoon while their mother was grocery shopping. Ben and Peter were trying to find where their mother hid their BB guns to kill squirrels. There had been discussion about killing one and putting it in their sister's room. Ben didn't want to kill something that day with his brother. He wanted to listen to Peter before their mother came home and made them busy. The boys had been fishing together, but killing something that breathed like him, Ben was certain, would feel different.

"Alright, enough bullshit talk. We need to all post up. Get ready for these birds." When the men walked to their posts, his father repeated the directions.

"You remember what to do, don't you? How to hold the gun and all? Make sure you hold this here, on the meat of your shoulder. You'll be sore tomorrow, but not as badly if you didn't hold it right. Not too much longer, Ben," John said. Ben strained to hear the soft coo of doves or the crunch of brush, anything that could signal enough life for him to mount his gun and shoot. The sun was spilling



over the edges of the field. The hint of sun was warm on the half of his face that it hit, making the other half feel even colder.

“Bird!” called the man who owned the field. John pointed to the right where the guide had told Ben the birds would come from. He watched the bird, solitary and quiet, and shot his gun. He missed and the bird flew off frenzied at the sound of the gun. Soon after, a few flew from the center of the brush around the pond, and the men shot at them. Ben shot again, not aiming, but just wanting to shoot and the silent thunder that came after the guns shook through his earplugs his father had shown him how to twist and put into his ears. He watched two birds fall into the pond, disrupting it with ripples that lapped into the reeds around it.

The men’s guns clicked as they reloaded. The birds that had fallen lay with their soft bellies upturned. The men laughed and spoke muffled words around the perimeter. John checked Ben’s gun and told him to reload.

“Bird!” John shouted. Ben shot at one of the birds, the spray from his shotgun speckling its wing and chest. Ben looked to see if anyone saw him hit the bird that was struggling on the ground.

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Ben went out of state for college years later. His brother was working in Nashville and would take over the family business. Ben had been kicked out of two high schools and barely got into Ole Miss. His mother started working as a

realtor after Ben got kicked out of his second high school, his father started working more out of town. He would drive all night to come back, but was rarely there. Peter was getting married in the fall to a girl he had been dating for almost six years. Tired of working at restaurants at home in the summer and smoking pot with his friends, Ben applied for an internship in Washington, D.C. He hated having to shave every day and deliver mail to senators who just threw the envelopes away. The city was hot and big and too many people his age thought they were too important. His friends rarely called, and his mother never did.. He was glad when his father planned a trip to visit him in Washington, but didn't hear until two days before that Peter was coming, too.

“That way we can expense it as a business trip,” John explained to Ben. Ben canceled plans with friends and then spent two hours waiting to hear when John and Peter were ready to meet up. They went to the Air and Space Museum, cramped between the crying babies of foreign women and people trying to escape the summer heat. His brother was determined to see the Wright brothers' plane. A model demonstrated how the plane had been designed like birds' wings.

“Ben, you remember that time we went dove hunting with those crazy men? Remember how cold it was?” his father said. Ben nodded, watching a sweating woman try to keep her toddler in a stroller. They left the exhibit and walked to the cramped hallway of the museum. Displays of taxidermied Russian space monkeys grimaced at them as they passed.

“Yeah, that was awesome,” Peter said. Ben looked at him.

“You weren’t there, it was only Dad and me and these redneck hunting guides. They got really drunk.”

“They might have just been drunk from the night before and kept it going,” John laughed, looking past his sons at Sputnik, hanging from the ceiling.

“I was there. Course I was. What’d y’all do? Leave me behind?” Peter laughed taking a picture of a man with a shirt that said *Why Be Bald?*

“Dude, check this guy’s shirt out. What does that even mean?”

“No, it was just Dad and I. I wore your hunting gear and used Grandpa’s shotgun,” Ben said.

“Dad, didn’t I go with you dove hunting? Down near Memphis?”

“Sure. Yeah, you did,” John said.

“No, it was just me with the guy that said the field was for growing dove,” Ben said.

“Growing dove. That’s good,” John laughed.

“Hey, why do you think America just has Sputnik. Were we just like, hey Russia, we’re America therefore we are privileged enough to just take your most prized space invention and then have the balls to not even give it its own room?” Peter asked. They all turned to look at the silver orb. It looked like a prop from an old science fiction film. Sputnik hung dated and forgotten in the foyer of the museum. A small plate stated its name and origin on the second floor balcony where Ben and his father and brother stood.

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The men killed several doves. John asked him if the kick was too strong on the gun and if he wanted to just watch for a while. Ben did not want to put down his gun or sit and watch.

“Holy shit! Look at that thing!” A crane flew from the backside of the pond. His long body pointed straight and narrow like a weathervane. The only marks on its white body were the dipstick black tips of its wings and a black spot on its head. The man with the red bandana shot the crane and it fell back first, wings pointed towards the heavens.

“You sonofabitch? The hell was that for?” the lead guide said.

“Hey, if it flies it dies,” the man who shot the crane said. John laughed and told Ben he was pretty sure killing cranes was illegal. At least in some states it was. When Ben didn’t respond, John lowered his gun and looked at his son.

“Bennyboy, you okay? Are you having fun? Peter sure would love this, little brother getting himself a dove,” Ben stared out at his dove, which now lay still in the field. The crane was dead in the reeds and couldn’t be seen from the perimeter of the field. He could feel his sweat through his long johns and his lips were chapped from licking them while waiting to mount his shotgun. The men laughed and John looked back at them and then again at Ben.

“It’s pretty fun isn’t it? Are you having a good time?” John asked.

“Dad, I wish everyone we know could be here right now.”

John laughed and moved like he was going to touch his son, thought about it, then raised shifted his gun to his other hand. Ben kept his gun ready to mount,

but only watched. Watched the birds that scattered at the shots slowly come back in the silence like open hands in the air.

## BLUE LIGHTS

By the time we took the trip to Paris, my husband and I both had affairs and both knew. And both chose to not say anything about it. We decided to take the trip in December and told our friends and family that it was our Christmas present to each other, we had enough things. And we'd both been so wanting to go to Paris. The trip was to try and act as a cover-up for all we had done to each other. As if Paris made up for adultery.

"Do you have the passports, Claire?" James asked from the bedroom. I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth, looking at the crow's feet and not so funny laugh lines on my face.

"They're in the front pocket of my carry-on. Why?"

"Just making sure I didn't leave mine in the office." I asked him why his passport would be at his office.

“Those few trips I had to go on to Canada last spring. For that deal we made. I figured I left mine at the office after those,” he said. I knew we were both happy not to make eye contact while he lied. He had gone with her, Cheryl. I think there was a business thing there, but I knew she went, too. The credit card statement had several bottles of wine and steamed mussels on it. James was allergic to shellfish.

“No they were here,” I said finishing with brushing my teeth. “It wouldn’t hurt to weigh our luggage, make sure it isn’t too heavy to try and take.”

“Yeah that sounds smart.” He was already pulling back the covers to his side of the bed. I moved our luggage to the door, they might be over the weight limit but we would both be too lazy to unpack anything and would end up paying the fee.

I had done the wifely thing and bought pretty sheer bras and panties. I folded them gently in my suitcase with lavender scented dryer sheets stacked in between them. The woman at the lingerie store said that with my skin tones, I should go with more pastel colors. Even though it was winter, she told me, I would look my best in peaches and baby pinks. I bought one black set but the rest were the colors of Easter eggs and looked beautiful in my suitcase. I slept in one of James’ old tee shirts he got for free when signing up for a membership at a gym. I wasn’t sure if he’d even like the lingerie so I packed the shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms in the morning.

My affair started in February. It ended after James brought home a small pumpkin as a gift to me. His affair, I thought, started shortly after mine in March. I wasn't sure of the exact time he stopped seeing her, but I stopped seeing Frank right before Halloween. We met at a gas station on the outside of town, halfway between our houses. It was cool but humid, so we sat with the air conditioning on in my car. There was a fireworks shop advertising a clearance sale across from the gas station. No one went in it while we talked for nearly three hours. At one point, a man stepped outside and smoked a cigarette, but that was all. Frank went inside and got a Coke for me and a Sprite for him so he didn't see the man.

"A guy came outside. Smoked a cigarette. So it is actually open," I said to him.

"I guess October isn't their primary season."

"No, I guess not."

"Are you going to tell James?" Frank asked. I picked at a hangnail and thought about it.

"I know he already knows. He is still seeing Cheryl, I don't know how you sit down and talk about these things, really. What do you even say?"

"I had an affair with my old high school teacher and left him broken hearted for you, now you do the same with the dentist girl?" Frank offered. I looked at him. He was smiling. Part of him didn't want me to end this. The other part knew it was something that belonged in novels too much to last. To play



along that it could last, he had an idea of us living in a cabin in the hill country and making homemade peach jam and selling it roadside with peppers.

“We could stay up reading to each other and go into town to buy used books or eat at a restaurant when we need socialization and civilization,” he said to me one afternoon. We could only see each other in the afternoons, except the weekends that James went on his trips.

“That sounds like a country song,” I told him. He kissed my elbow and slipped his hand under the sheets to my stomach. As he spoke, he made circles around my belly button.

“It sounds incredible. Besides, I don’t have enough to do around here,” he said. Frank had retired from teaching and wrote freelance and did some editing work on another former student’s independent literary magazine. His parents left him plenty of money and a house on the Guadeloupe River so he was able to say things like *let’s sell peppers and peach jam and read for the rest of our lives on rocking chairs by the river.*

Frank and I saw each other across the room at a poetry reading for the first time since my high school graduation. We spoke in a corner until all the folding chairs the book store had set out for the reading were put in a storage closet and the owner put the keys in the door, careful to make sure it was loud enough that we heard. Frank suggested we step over to the coffee shop. We sat over full cups of coffee talking about his divorce, about his parents passing away to cancer in the same year.

“So, Claire, when did you marry?” he asked, poking at the emptied Splenda packet on the table with the wooden coffee stirrer.

“Almost six years ago. Not long after finishing my MFA, I moved back here and started work. We were set up by mutual friends, married ones. And that was that.” I looked at my coffee, cold after sitting untouched. He told me that he was happy for me.

“Where is he now?” he asked, looking around as if James might be at a table behind us.

“The office. He works very hard. He got a promotion not long ago. He stays late a lot,” I hesitated sounding like I was complaining. “But with me working from home and having deadlines every week, it is nice to have the house to myself.”

“That’s good. That’s really good.” We talked for another hour or so and exchanged e-mails, promising to stay in touch. He e-mailed me the next morning and we agreed to meet that weekend for lunch. I told James. He was amused that I was that kid who still talked to her old teachers. Frank and I slept together three weeks later in his kitchen.

We landed in Paris in the morning and it was snowing by the afternoon. From inside a warm and crowded café, James and I sipped at coffee and watched the people walking by on the street. The French women around me looked dark and slick. Their hair was in tightly wound chignons atop their heads, or resting on their shoulders right above their collarbones. I thought about Cheryl, the dental

hygienist James had been sleeping with, and wondered how she did her hair. For work, I knew she wore it in a ponytail because she had once cleaned my teeth. Cheryl did the thing I hate at dentists' office where they ask you questions while your mouth is wide open with their tools in it. Cheryl had an ass like scoops of ice cream. When I went to get my teeth cleaned, I expected her to break down in tears and confess to the whole affair. What she actually did was lean over the counter to grab me a toothbrush, her cheerleader ass right next to my shoulder. The next weekend James stayed at her apartment for a couple days, claiming to be on a business trip. He called three times. Twice when I actually was sitting at my desk, and once when I lied and said I was.

It was strange that the characteristics of Cheryl I decided James liked, the big teeth, the short blonde ponytail and tanned skin, were the opposite of the things Frank would murmur that he loved about me. My glasses for reading late at night and my fair and freckled legs and shoulders James teased me about. But Frank said he adored them and then buried his head between my breasts.

"Do you need a refill?" James asked, touching the inside of my elbow. I looked down at his fingers resting there, an odd and intimate place to touch. I spoke in French to the waitress, telling her I did not need a refill.

"I love it when you speak in French. Remember, we would go to that market next to the French restaurant? What was it called? And you would pick up meats and bread, chatting away in French with the bakers," James said. He wasn't looking at me as he spoke.

“That’s how we both gained eight pounds the first year we were married,” I said.

“Between your late hours at night and my early mornings, dinners were all we had, Claire,” James said. He stirred his drink, fussing with the napkin. I knew we were both wondering how we went from cooking meals together, barely dressed from hurried lovemaking—to sitting next to each other in a café in Paris without anything to talk about but what we once did together.

Our hotel was near the Opera House. I had suggested we do something less expensive. James insisted that this was our Christmas present to each other and we should make the most of it. We strolled around the Champs-Élysées with our hands balled in fists in our pockets and our breath hanging like small veils around our mouths. Dinner was not far, so we chose to walk.

“They will have turned the lights on in the trees when we walk back,” I told James.

“Can we see the Eiffel Tower from here?”

“The trees are prettier than the tower, I think. The lights are blue and it looks like something from *Alice in Wonderland*,” I said. The sun made the small windows of the tall buildings red and orange and parts of the street turned pink, though most of it stayed dark. There weren’t many people out, the Muslim women with their heads to the ground and bags in front of them asking for coins and police changing shifts. Three officers walked towards us. They couldn’t have been older than thirty, but they looked hard in the shadows from the buildings.

The officers walked the way only a man who carries a gun or has killed someone can walk. The cobalt blue of their police uniforms demanded attention, as did the long, black night sticks slapping against their thighs with every step. One officer lagged behind them. He grew closer to us as the others already passed. The officer searched through his pocket and removed a red lollipop. He stuck the sucker in his mouth and smiled at us, the red lollipop hanging like a thermometer from his chapped lips.

After dinner, James told me I was right about the blue trees. It stopped snowing hours before, but it was cold enough that snow still lay around the tree bases and under subway railings where it turned brown with grime. James walked ahead of me and looked at the lights more closely. He looked very handsome in his dark overcoat. He wore a grey cashmere scarf around his neck, a gift from his sister years ago that had stayed in a box in our closet until this trip. His cheeks and the rims of his nostrils were pink from the cold. He looked at me, one hand holding the slender tree trunk, and smiled. Before I could smile back he looked back up at the lights, then down the street at the rows and rows of blue lighted trees.

“James,” I waited for him to respond before I continued.

“Yeah?” he said, barely glancing over his shoulder.

“James,” I said again. He stopped and faced me now, the tree limb still shaking from where he had just let go.

“What are we going to do?” He opened his mouth to respond. But then closed it and looked at the stained sidewalk. There was the echo of laughter in the distance. Neither of us turned to see where it might be coming from.

“I don’t know, I don’t know what we do now,” James said. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and looked back at the tree. James clapped his hands together and blew into them.

“What do you want?” James asked. A taxicab passed us on the street and we both turned to follow it. I buried my mouth and nose into my scarf, feeling the fabric moisten with my breath.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how we fix this,” I said.

“What?”

“I said, I don’t know how we fix this,” I paused. “Do you even want to fix this?” I hadn’t thought about what he wanted, if he even wanted to stay in the marriage. I hadn’t been able to think past getting to Paris.

“I do,” he looked away, then back at me and sighed, “I just don’t know what we do.”

“I ended it, you know,” I said.

“I know.”

“You did, too.”

“I did,” James said, “Do you want to go back to the hotel? It’s really cold.”  
I nodded and stayed behind him the entire walk to the hotel.

James said he was going to take a bath when we got back in the room. I stood by the bed, my ears hurting from the cold. James started the water in the marble tub, audible through the shut door. I took my clothes off and put on the peach-colored lingerie. The fabric was as thin as tissue and the color of lips. I heard the tap stop running and a splash of tub water from the bathroom. Changing my mind, I put on a pair of James' boxers and a tee shirt. I pulled the blanket at the edge of the bed around my shoulders and went into the bathroom.

James was lying in the tub with a wet hand towel over his face. The mirror was fogged and sweating.

"Is that you?" he asked without moving.

"Yeah." I sat wrapped like a newborn on the commode, trying to warm my feet by sitting on them. I sat like that many times with Frank. I would read to him or talk while he bathed.

"Claire," James said my name. I waited for him to continue.

"Maybe we should separate for a while, just to have some breathing room. And think," I said. I didn't know if that was the right thing to say, if I should have climbed into the tub with him with my clothes on.

"Yeah. Maybe," he said. "Claire, did, do, did we," he sighed and took the hand towel off of his face. "I don't really know what to say, how did you know?"

"Your e-mail password is the same as our alarm code. And the credit card statement with Canada. And the mussels," I said.

"Oh."

"How did you?"

“I followed you one day, you met at a Starbucks parking lot near the Heights. I followed you back to his house, well almost. When I saw y’all turning into a residential area, I didn’t need to sit outside and count the hours you were in there.”

“You followed me?”

“I was already seeing, I was already...I knew something was going on, and I didn’t know how else to find out,” James said. “That was an awful day, God, that was terrible.” We looked at each other, waiting for the other to say something that made this better.

“We can check flights home tomorrow. I think there is a six o’clock. I will go stay at a hotel for a while,” he said.

“No, I’ll stay with my sister. She can come get me from the airport,” I said. James stood in the tub and I looked away until he wrapped a towel around his waist. He kicked off the soapsuds from his feet and walked to the sink to brush his teeth, then put the toothbrush down.

“Claire,” I looked up at him and he said, “It was an accident. I didn’t do it to hurt you.” I said that I knew that, and I didn’t mean to hurt him, either, and I went to the bedroom and lay down with my feet still on the floor. James came in a few moments later and turned the lamp off. He stood near the bed, but didn’t move. We were very still in the room, breathing for a while, and then he unwrapped the blanket from around me. He slid his hands up his boxers I was wearing and told me my hips were narrow.

“Childbirth would not be fun for you,” he said.



“Rarely have I heard it described as fun.” James kissed my stomach, but not my mouth. The room was dark enough it could have been any two people on the bed, but it wasn’t. The next week I moved into my sister’s spare bedroom. While we were in Paris, though, as he undressed me, the snow made confetti shadows on the narrow slant of headboard caught by the light from the street.

## DUCKS IMPRINT THE FIRST THING THEY SEE

Robby Daige had been the boy. Marnie didn't have to ask. She wouldn't have asked. She heard enough from people at school. Ever since Joyce had gotten her cherry popped, she thought she was really something. Marnie heard that her sister cried in the back of Robby's dad's Pontiac and they had to throw away the blanket Robby had brought with him. The blanket, to Marnie, was thoughtful. She watched him and her the night Marnie assumed it happened from their bedroom window almost a month ago. She peered out over the sill, her nose flush against the cold glass. Her breath circled tissue-like around their images, fading with her inhales. Robby leaned out of his car to smack Joyce on the bottom. She didn't turn to joke back at him, she just swatted with her hand.

Joyce pointed her big toe, painted Agent Orange, and dipped it into the carpet. She found a roll of duct tape and stretched it the length of their shared room.

“This is your side,” she tapped into the fibers of the carpet. “This is my side. If you cross it I will kill you.” Joyce’s side had her bed, her nightstand, her dresser, Joyce’s dresser and the door to the hallway.

“Do you understand? I will kill you,” she repeated. “James was here earlier, you know. He picked Mom up to go.”

“I don’t like that he just comes here when she isn’t even home. He does that sometimes,” Marnie said.

“I know, right? It’s creepy. And messed up. It hasn’t been that long, has it?”

“Almost a year. In April, it’ll be. Easter. ”

“Shit. You’re right. He isn’t even like Dad. James, I mean. He must be a good fuck,” Joyce said.

“I don’t want to think about Mom that way.”

“You’re such a prude. I bet she hasn’t put out yet, though. That’s why he is being all grocery-shopping- flower-giving boyfriend. God, I can’t wait to get my license so I can drive away from this house.”

“I just don’t like being around James,” Marnie said but Joyce was not listening anymore. She stared out at the driveway, at the rows of hedges lined with monkey grass. The places in their neighbors’ yards they had played jungle as little girls. Their mom would use the hose and a bottle of Johnson and Johnson baby shampoo she found in the garage to give them baths. Dad would pull in from work, the car’s hood rippling like water in the heat, and scoop their wet bodies to his own.

“Don’t think you can come over to my side of the room,” Joyce said, eyes still on the book.

“I’m just trying to get out of the room.”

“Well you’d better not cross the line.”

“Mom’s going to make you pick it up when she sees this.”

“Mom isn’t going to do anything because she’s too busy having lunch with her girlfriends and going on trips with James,” Joyce said.

“You’re so mean to her. After all she’s been through.”

“We’ve been through the same thing. Don’t lecture me about it. Don’t act like it’s been harder on you or mom than it’s been on me. You weren’t even here.”

Marnie hated when Joyce brought that up. Marnie went to the beach with a friend from school that weekend. Their mother hated the idea of them not all being together on Easter, so they compromised and Marnie left right after church that Easter morning for the beach. She had just gotten her bathing suit on when the call came that she needed to come home. The ride back to the city was silent; her friend’s dad didn’t even turn on the radio, he just glanced at her from the rearview mirror of his Volvo every now and then.

Marnie walked to the duct tape line and ripped up the end by the door. She tried to wad it into a ball, but the glue had lost its adhesive from the carpet so she just threw it at her sister. It landed a couple inches further from her hand and she turned to walk downstairs.

“No way. I’m leaving. I’m going on a walk. You can stay here in this house,” Joyce jumped up and shoved past her. The duct tape ball stuck to her sock. She shook her foot, then ripped it off and stuck it to the top of the banister. Marnie waited, hoping Joyce wasn’t really leaving, but she heard the door slam and the house went quiet.

They were given baby ducks that Easter. Dad was in the yard hosing the begonias and ferns while the babies walked around, pecking at the ground and chirping occasionally. Joyce was lying in the grass in her bikini Mom hated, who was at the church helping the punch and cookie ladies clean up the fellowship hall. Joyce liked the way the ducks’ flat naked feet felt walking across her belly. She like how their beaks poked at her shoulder and ear lobes. Joyce almost stepped on two of the ducks when Dad fell and didn’t get up. There were only three ducks and left when they got home from the hospital. Most of them wandered into the street from the open gate and were run over by cars. Others were picked up by neighborhood dogs. Mom was still in her Easter dress and smelled like lilies and Lysol when she fell asleep on the couch that night.

Marnie heard them come in the house late that night. It was much later than curfew, or what curfew was supposed to be if their Mom was there to pay attention. Marnie locked the door to their room when she was left alone at the house very long, which she was a lot lately. She could go to a neighbor or a friend’s house, but she didn’t like to leave home. Everyone else seemed to want

to, so Marnie felt like she needed to stay. Marnie walked down to the kitchen because she was curious what beer smelled like on her sister, what she looked like after sex. What a boy looked like at this time of night. Joyce leaned against the counter and eating a peach with a fork. Robby was licking the juice from her fingers and jawbone where it had run. Robby looked someone's cousin the family all decided together to dislike. His hair was matted with sweat on his forehead. His dark curls swirled like eddies around his ears and exposed the pink flesh of his scalp. His hands looked swollen on Joyce's body. Robby had the stubble of a man, a man like their father who had to shave again before going out to dinner on Friday nights. Marnie knew Robby would have thick dark hair on his chest and that would spread out over his stomach like the spine of a book, darkening between his legs.

Marnie sucked in her bottom lip, watching them in the kitchen. Their hips pressed against each other. Marnie felt between her thighs go numb and tingle like a limb that has fallen asleep. Her nightgown felt thin as she watched Robby's hands run up her sister's shorts and back down her legs, Marnie's small undeveloped nipples hard like bee bees against the fabric. Joyce continued to stab at the peach, digging the prongs in the grooved lines of the pit to get the meat. His hands traveled up her stomach under her shirt and up to her breasts. Joyce said something to him and Robby said something back. Marnie leaned to try and hear, stepping on a place in the floor that creaked from cooling in the night.

“Jesus! What are you doing here!” Joyce pushed Robby from her, the peach rolled across the counter. “What the hell are you doing?” Marnie swallowed hard, sure they could hear it.

“I was hungry.”

“Is this your little sister?” Robby slurred, taking his hands off Joyce for a moment.

“Shut up, Robby. She is too young for you,” Joyce pushed his chest smiling out of the side of her mouth. “Go back to bed, Marnie.”

“You’re too young for me, too, Joyce. So this’s your sister?”

“She’s only twelve, you perv. Marnie, go to sleep,” Joyce pushed at his chest again. Robby stumbling back.

“If she wants to eat, she can come eat a peach. They’re juicy,” Robby said, wrapping his arms around Joyce’s waist, his fingers reaching into the tops of her shorts.

“I just want a peach,” Marnie said, her voice sounding smaller than she wanted. Robby extended one arm out to Marnie holding a peach, the other hand reaching further into Joyce’s pants. Joyce closed her eyes.

“Fine. Come eat a stupid peach,” Joyce said. Marnie walked to them, the smell of cheap beer like urine on both of them. She took the peach from his open hand. Robby snaked his arm around her waist, too.

“She’s got some pointy hips, this one,” Robby said. Holding both of them, their backs against his chest. Marnie didn’t wash the peach before she bit into it.

Robby pulled her closer to him. “Robby, don’t be pervy,” Joyce said, concentrating on her peach again.

“Sisters. Look at you in this nightie. I haven’t ever seen a nightie like this. The fabric’s so soft. Like, I can feel your skin through it,” Robby said, releasing Joyce and wrapping both arms around Marnie’s waist. Through the nightgown, she could feel him hard on her butt when he squared his hips against her back. His hands felt sweaty and clumsy as they moved down her body.

“Robby, lay off, ” Joyce said. She looked up in the quiet. Marnie could only hear Robby’s breathing heavy in her ear and his saliva making it moist. Marnie wished Mom was there. She wished Dad was there to meet the boys Joyce went out with and shake their hands at the door like dads did in movies. If he was there, the ducks would be grown now and they could have let them go at the pond at the park. He took them there when they were little girls on Saturdays while Mom made lunch. They brought loaves of Wonderbread and ripped pieces up to throw into the water, believing the ducks preferred it soggy.

“I can have two sisters if I want.” His sour breath moved down her nightgown over her flat chest. Marnie’s fingernails started digging into her peach as Robby held her thighs through the nightgown. “Two sisters,” he said.

“Please. Stop,” Marnie said.

Joyce looked up at Marnie’s voice to see Robby running his hands over her sister. “Robby, back off!” she said, her voice came out hoarse and squeaky. “Let go of her.”

“I like the hips on this one. You can just keep eating over there, Joyce.”



“Robby, let go of her now. I swear.”

“Or what, Joyce, you going to cry like always? My daddy died and now we’re are alone. Eat your peach.” He spat as he spoke, the light from the deck caught it in the air. Marnie picked a fork up from the counter, raised it over her head and stabbed Robby in the bicep.

“Holy fuck! You crazy bitch! What are you doing?” Robby screamed. The fork stuck out from his arm, erect and throbbing.

“Get out of my house, asshole,” Joyce pushed him, easy to move in his shock. “Get out now,” she hissed through her tight lips. Marnie slid down the counter’s side to the floor. She heard Joyce slam and lock the back door. “And I’ll call the cops if you come back!”

“You bitch! You crazy bitch!” Robby yelled on the deck.

“Get the fuck away from my house!” Joyce told him through the glass. The tree light their father had installed when they moved in made Robby’s back look orange and June bugs swarmed like glitter as he walked through the gate.

Joyce walked around to the side of the counter Marnie hunched on, “Are you okay?”

“I think.”

“Go to bed,” Joyce told her. She was holding the fork she pulled from of Robby’s arm in shoving him out the door. The kitchen grew quiet. The lights from the deck made the copper pots that hung over the island create long shapes on the stainless steel fridge. Marnie stood, threw the peach pits in the trash and

walked upstairs. Joyce stayed still in the dark kitchen for a moment then dropped the bloodied utensil in a pot filled with soapy water in the sink.

## CANARY IN A CAGE

The doves that pecked at the gravel in the train station were the color of caramel. Maggie told the British couple this over her *bouillaibaisse* at dinner, which she had been instructed to soak her toasts in. David said to scrape the garlic on the toast and let it float in the soup. Jilly asked if she was sure the birds were doves, not pigeons.

“No, they were doves,” Maggie said. “Doves eat gravel because it helps them digest their food.”

“That’s true. Unusual, though, doves,” David said.

“What is ‘dove’ in French?” Maggie bit into a toast.

“*Colombe*,” David poured *rosé* wine from a blue decanter. Maggie watched the dark blue glass. “They make these locally. There’s a glass blower down the street,” Jilly said, noticing Maggie watching.

“Have you ever eaten a dove?” Maggie asked.

“How terrible to think of eating a dove,” Jilly said, her soup spoon raised.

“Many people do. I have. They’re quite good,” David said.

Behind him the restaurant owner wiped her brow in the doorway of the kitchen. Maggie watched her for a moment as she set painted dishes on the forearms of the young waitress, probably her niece, and handed her a bottle of wine. The dining part of the restaurant was four rows of wooden tables lined up and sectioned off in the cobblestone courtyard. The buildings around them had window boxes with red flowers in them. A calico cat slept in one of the boxes, with one paw dangling from it.

“I’ve eaten pigeon. Not dove. In Rome with my family when we came a few years ago,” Maggie said.

“Oh, yes, around Angie’s birthday?” David asked.

“I’ve had pigeon. It was scrumptious,” Jilly said wiping the condensation from her wine glass on her yellow linen napkin, no doubt also locally made.

“Yes, you have. That’s right. You know, pigeons mate for life?” David said to Maggie.

“They do?”

“Here we go,” Jilly said. David smiled at her, she smiled back and said, “Well, go on, you’ve already started.”

Maggie watched them share a small moment of recollection. They traveled very often and had a very glamorous life. But unlike the wealthy elite Maggie knew at home, Jilly and David traveled together because they wanted to escape, rather than escape from each other.

The whole ride from the train station David had asked her French words and phrases. Both of them were fluent enough to be clever and sarcastic in French and held dinner parties for their neighbors. David would nod approvingly when Maggie got a word right on their ride to the chateau, and explain them when she got the words wrong. Her mother said it would be like that, as if everything was sort of a trivia game. He would correct her accent and inflection on words. Maggie was very American, she gave a great effort, but she was very American.

“Indeed, pigeons mate for life. When we were in Milan, Jilly here ordered one. I told her somewhere there was a husband pigeon flying about asking, ‘Where’s my wife?’” David laughed, “She did not find it funny, however.”

“No, nor was it funny when he found a cubby to hide in in the hotel room, unbeknownst to me. He called out, ‘Where’s my wife? Where’s my wife?’ when I had no idea where he was. Some phantom voice so rudely making fun of my dinner. I went down to the bar alone to have a drink after that,” Jilly said.

“And eat another pigeon?” Maggie asked. They all laughed. Maggie was glad to be eating with them. She was very glad to be away from the international college where she was studying. She liked France very much and was worried the heat and noise and awful students at the college would ruin the country for her.

“At least it wasn’t a dove. Doves represent peace and unity,” Jilly said.

“Yes, however, you widowed an animal,” David laughed.

“I suppose neither is better. But my pigeon was delicious.”

The next day they would watch a toddler as he chased pigeons near the town cathedral. He laughed and squealed, occupied for well over half an hour. His hair stuck in strips to his forehead from baby sweat. His face was pink and round. They all agreed they were jealous of his easy entertainment, and how nice chasing pigeons must be. Jilly and David had no children of their own. Maggie had always wondered why they didn't, she later learned Jilly could not so they chose a different life.

David had been very close with Maggie's Aunt Angie when she moved to California. They befriended each other quickly because the uncle was a golf pro and busiest on the weekends. David became a brother of sorts and kept Angie from growing lonesome. Over time, David and Jilly assimilated into the family and knew Maggie's parents and grandparents. Maggie was the first of the nieces to come visit the chateau.

Maggie e-mailed Jilly asking for advice about the Riviera when she was accepted to continue French credits at a college in Cannes. Jilly replied that she really should "pop" over to their chateau and spend a weekend with them, that is, if she wasn't too busy traveling with friends. Maggie came to the college knowing no one and found rather quickly college students are the same in all countries and can be rather exhausting. She was happy to be away from the small dorm room, the loud American girls from Philadelphia and the sexual pursuits of the Colombian students.

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Snow was falling in February when her mother called to tell Maggie the news. She told Maggie to step outside of the library. They were trying to book tickets for her to go home Easter, Maggie assumed it was a reminder to print her boarding pass.

“Mags, Ben Atkins committed suicide last night,” her mom said as tenderly a mother can deliver such news, “it’s just awful.”

“How? Why?” Maggie asked. She put her hand out to feel for the wall behind her and sat against it.

“He was at home. He was home for the weekend, I am so sorry Mags,” her mother offered. Maggie nodded, though her mother couldn’t hear it. They were both crossing off the tally in their heads. Maggie had been part of therapy group. There were six of them, Maggie was the only girl, which surprised her when they first started. She assumed girls had more problems, or were more aware of their problems.

They all had some sort of “incident,” that’s how the high school clarified their individual depression or manic depression or suicide attempts or all the above, and the school wanted to be a part of the healing process. Looking back, Maggie wondered if the school was trying to also make sure that they kept their reputation of having no current students commit suicide. The rival schools in the area had a few, and people talked about it. They were the inaugural group, to see if peer counseling could be the modernized answer to teen angst. Maggie herself

had taken a palm full of Tylenol Cold and Sinus PM Valentine's Day morning after writing letters to her parents and two brothers. Her mom found her dazed and shaking when she came in her room. She was bringing her breakfast in bed and had cut Pepperidge Farm cinnamon toast in X's and O's on a pink and red plate.

Maggie spent a week in a facility the hospital recommended. She was given a green wristband, but it moved to blue by the third day. Maggie's dad packed her a bag of her own clothes that didn't have any kind of strings or sharp edges, and she was allowed her blanket and a few books. Maggie and her mom rode in a silent ambulance to the facility. She cried hugging them the first night at the door one had to be buzzed in and out of. Begging them not to make her stay there in the awful building with plastic teal furniture and dirty linoleum floors. Maggie wanted to shower the first night, to do so she had to have an attending nurse stand by the shower, with the curtain back.

No one at the facility was like Maggie. No one's family came to eat meals with them or had any notion of leaving. A few even said they'd been there before. She heard them debating how much her jeans cost and if her Ugg boots were real. Maggie didn't speak till after dinner the second night when she was reading *Jane Eyre*. In middle school Maggie did her first research paper on the book, but it was something to read other than her name and blood type on the facility-issued wristband.

"You read?" The girl who called herself Daisy asked.

"Yes. I like reading a lot," Maggie said.



“You like to read?” Marcus, who was sweaty from withdrawals, asked.

“It’s one of my favorite things to do,” Maggie said, this time shutting the book with her finger holding the page she was on.

“What’s that book about?” the girl who called herself Daisy asked.

“A girl, lady, I guess, who has a pretty rough childhood, then she goes and works in this big house that’s creepy.”

“Why?” another girl asked who had been sitting with her back to the group.

“Because she doesn’t have anything, really. Her stepmom is awful and basically kicks her out. So she needs a job,” Maggie said.

“Man, that blows,” Marcus said.

“Her life sounds real hard,” the girl who called herself Daisy said. Daisy was probably thirteen and a compulsive liar. She told Maggie she was eighteen and pregnant with her uncle’s Siamese twins. There were rumors she had been there the longest.

“What are you reading in it now?” a girl who had on a green band like Maggie asked.

“She’s realizing she loves the guy who owns the house,” Maggie said. Marcus asked her to read out loud. Until they had to go to bed, Maggie read *Jane Eyre* to the other kids she would never see again. She was released two days later before breakfast and didn’t say good-bye.

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The *merguez* sausage and couscous was spicy, but not too spicy. A red sauce came in a bowl and was set on the table between the three of them. David told Maggie to mix it with the sausage.

“It really adds extra flavor,” he said. Maggie did as was suggested and felt her mouth burn from the spices and peppers in the sauce. She swallowed hard and took a large drink from her wine glass.

“We really love that this part of France has such Middle Eastern influence. That’s how we have these delightful spices and sausages,” Jilly told her, spooning out more of the sauce. “The French call this peasant food, since the peasants were immigrants from the Middle East. It makes for a very diverse dining experience, doesn’t it?”

When the dessert menus arrived, Jilly took David’s glasses and held one of the tea candles next to the menu to read.

“My, my, aren’t we getting old. We should have Maggie read off the menu to us. You didn’t know you would be babysitting us, did you?” David laughed.

“We aren’t that old. Are we?” Jilly said without looking up from the menu.

“Maggie, what tasty desserts have you been eating in Cannes?”

“My dear, we are quite old. This September it will be ten years since Angie passed away,” David said.

“Ten years? My goodness. That certainly does age us, doesn’t it?”

For a moment they all were quiet. “How did the two of you meet?” Maggie said. Jilly and David looked at each other and smiled, not in a way that was forced or sappy, but a knowing smile.

“Well, Jilly begged me and begged me to marry her,” David shrugged.

“Oh, right. We were so much older than the people around us who were already married, we were scraping the bottom of the barrel, really,” Jilly said.

“Actually, Jilly was rather brave. You see, I met her when I was doing a little business in England, but I lived in California. She had a thing for curly-haired, tall men and I, well, I just thought she was lovely. So after some courtship, I convinced her to move to Los Angeles,” David pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Everyone thought I was loony for going,” Jilly added.

“You just moved there? Alone?” Maggie asked.

“Well, that was the thing. I asked Angie if she would write to her. We didn’t have e-mail or computers and phone calls were so dreadfully expensive. But I worried about Jilly getting over to America and having no girl friends. Angie, the happy person she was, was delighted to write to Jilly and basically offer her a friendship,” David said.

“The first letter she wrote to me she said she was David’s friend and she was a sexy California girl with a great, big bust line and blonde hair,” Jilly laughed.

“Did she clarify that she was not?”

“No, I didn’t really know what she looked like until I got to Los Angeles. It made me love her more, though, that she had the humor to introduce herself that way,” Jilly said. Angie, in every picture Maggie had ever seen and the memory she

had of her aunt, had short auburn hair. She was from Mississippi, not California, and her bust line was far from great and big.

“We kept up a correspondence until I got to California. And that’s how we became friends.”

The three of them grew quiet. The waitress looked at them to see if they were ready to order dessert. Seeing they were not, she went back to folding the yellow napkins in her lap.

“I have been getting a lot of *gâteau au chocolat* with custard. It is divine. I am sure that is where all of my weight gain will come from on this trip. The food I eat in the city is mostly white fish, but I don’t scrimp on dessert,” Maggie said.

“Custard in French is ‘*crème anglaise*,’ which roughly translated means English cream. I guess we Brits aren’t too terrible in our culinary contributions,” David said, “I see it here on the menu.” He signaled to the waitress. She set the napkins on the chair and pushed her hair behind her ears before walking to them. The courtyard was empty and the owner of the restaurant was blowing out candles on the unoccupied tables. David ordered the molten cake and some bread pudding, “for diversity,” he said.

“Do you think her girls remember her?” Jilly asked. Maggie knew she was referring to Angie. She thought for a moment.

“I don’t know that Bethany does. She was so young. Alex and I were only ten and eleven and there are a lot of things I don’t remember from those years. Mary does, she remembers the most.” Angie didn’t want her girls or any of the nieces to know when she was diagnosed with ALS, so they didn’t. Maggie grew up

thinking it was normal to go visit family two states away every three weeks. All the girls swam and played mermaid games in her aunt and uncle's pool. The grown-ups sat on the deck and spoke about what was going to happen. And what had happened. Stories came out over the years Maggie never knew about. Different treatments they tried, the painful transition from walker to wheelchair and feeding tube.

The first memory Maggie had of David was after the funeral. The girls had changed out of their stockings and black dresses, but the adults had not. David picked up dinner and put *The Best of Earth, Wind and Fire* on the stereo. Maggie remembered him shimmying down the hallway holding plastic bags with Styrofoam take-out boxes in them.

"It isn't talked about much. Dad will tell stories. They love when he does. Especially from college. Mom tells them about Angie and William's wedding and relationship. But Dad always tells the funny stories. I think there are a lot of funny stories," Maggie said.

The sudden flicker of light from a room caught their attention. A small girl came to the window box with the cat. Then she picked up the cat, murmuring something into its fur, inaudible to the courtyard, and carried him from the window.

"There are a lot of funny stories. That is true," David said. When it came, the cake was warm and rich and ran into the custard, making swirls on the blue dessert plate.

The next morning an old Labrador sat near a bench by the bakery. He yawned and lay down, resting his face under the shade of the bench.

“Look at this old chap. He is quite the fellow,” David said. Jilly was at home setting the table for breakfast. David and Maggie drove into town to pick up fresh croissants and bread for dinner that night.

“The town has two bars, those right there,” David pointed at the two buildings that old men were already sitting at and talking to each other across the porches. “Two butchers, two bakers,” David continued.

“Two candlestick makers?” Maggie asked.

“Only one candlestick maker, but two tailors,” David handed her the morning paper and grabbed the basket from the back of the car, then took the paper back. The dog thumped his tail three times slowly when they passed, but never raised his head. The bakery smelled like butter and had a line waiting to speak to the woman behind the counter. Each person in line turned when David and Maggie walked in the already open door.

*“Bonjour.”*

*“Bon matin.”*

*“Bonjour.”*

*“Bonjour.”*

*“Bon matin.”*

One by one they turned to greet Maggie and David with a nod of the head. They each had their own baskets similar to David’s and morning papers stuck under their arms. Behind the glass were fruit tarts and pastries. Loaves of bread

and baguettes lined shelves behind the counter. The bakery was very small and Maggie felt she wanted to sit in a chair in the corner and watch the people come in and out all day.

“They always greet you. Not just the shop owner, but the other patrons always do, too. It’s rather lovely, isn’t it?” David said. Maggie nodded. He rattled off something in French to the man in front of them. They laughed and pointed at the paper. The man wore a blue linen shirt. He was dark and his chest hair that reached above the buttons of his shirt was starkly white against his sunned skin.

“French humor is very interesting,” David said. “You’re going to order two *pains au chocolat* and two croissants, *s’il vous plaît*.”

“I am?” Maggie asked.

“You’re the French student, aren’t you?”

The woman behind the counter said something in French and motioned to Maggie and David while the man with the chest hair left with a handful of baguettes. Maggie ordered and the woman handed her four wax paper bags with the breakfast breads in them. They were still warm in Maggie’s hand. David handed the woman some coins, she smiled and handed them to a little boy at her side. Maggie hadn’t seen the boy till she was at the counter. He ran to the back room smiling. The woman said something to David. He raised his hand giving a slight wave, and they turned to leave.

“*Bonne journée*,” the woman called.

“*Bonne journée*,” Maggie said over her shoulder. The dog was eating the hard end of a baguette when they passed him walking to the car.

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Maggie didn't know all the boys in her high school group had dealt with things. She knew Max from student government. He did drugs, but Max also made straight A's and was the captain of the lacrosse team, so no one seemed to care. Cooper had been in and out of school. Maggie was friends with his younger sister and knew Cooper had been sent to a discipline boot camp in the middle of the night. He came back taller and with ropey muscles. She loosely knew the others. One had gotten early acceptance to Chapel Hill and one was an All-Conference golfer. Ben's family was one of the wealthiest in the city, maybe even the state. People talked about his father's affairs with secretaries that led to divorce before being charged with embezzlement and fraud.

All the stories came out over the year they had to go to the Board of Trustees conference room with the school chaplain and counselor. It worked because they didn't know each other well before and didn't compete in any realm of their high school worlds. Three graduated that year, leaving half the group. Another group was started for some underclassmen, but they kept them separate so they wouldn't have to break up so much when people graduated. And it worked through graduation, even through the first years of college. But in the past two years, the boys were gone.

One jumped off the balcony of his apartment while his mom went to get groceries, two hanged themselves, two took fistfuls of pills. Ben took the fancy



rifle some dead man had carried into a battle and shot himself in his parents' oak-walled library. The fire, unstoked, stayed on all night, and when the family maid found him in the morning she thought he might be alive because his body was still warm from where he'd fallen on the hearth. Maggie was angry with all the boys. If you feel yourself drowning, you swim to the surface. They knew this. All of them had doctors' numbers or therapists', even each other's. She didn't go to the last two funerals, no one expected her to. Most people didn't know she even knew them well. Maggie was placed in counseling with a therapist and a psychiatrist to make sure that she was okay. She was okay, but she stayed angry with them. She was angry with them for not forcing themselves up and with the world for not trying to help them. Months later the France opportunity presented itself, and her family and therapist thought it would be good for her to see another world. Or try to believe in one.

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The pool was flecked with thirsty wasps. Some skimmed the pool and flew back up, others spread their needle legs and floated across the cool surface of the water. Jilly told her they weren't angry, stingy wasps, just thirsty. The three of them sat in the shade, finishing their cappuccinos before their walk. Maggie had one foot folded under her, and the other dangling in the wasp water.

"We can bring water if we would like, it will be rather hot," Jilly said. She was wearing a straw hat matching Maggie's they had bought the day before in

town when they stopped in an ice cream shop that proclaimed to have the best violet ice cream in France.

“I’ve never heard of violet ice cream,” Maggie pointed at the sign.

“This whole region used to, well, still does, make perfume. This town made theirs with violets,” Jilly said.

“Let’s have a look at this ice cream. I don’t remember the last time I got a cone of ice cream,” David directed them to the small shop. Maggie was the last to order, choosing the violet flavor.

“I cannot believe you picked that,” David said.

“The color is so pretty. I feel like it’ll taste good just because the color is so nice,” Maggie said taking her small cone and paying the shop owner. They walked a ways in silence, eating their ice cream. David wandered off while Maggie and Jilly leaned against an old building, admiring their pretty cones. David came back with matching straw hats for them and a bag of nectarines for Maggie to take back to the college with her as a snack. Jilly and Maggie both wore their hats to go on the small hike.

David explained how the property had been a retreat for tuberculosis patients. “Our college was like that, too, but for children. There are strange murals on the walls of cats chasing butterflies and clouds,” Maggie said.

“They never painted over them?” David asked.

“What other things are there?”

“There is a sort of veranda painted next to my bedroom. You can’t see it very well because the lighting is so bad. But there’s a table and an open window and a birdcage with a canary in it,” Maggie said. “It’s very odd.”

They came up a short ways on the hill to the edge of the goat cheese farm. It was a small building made of stones that were bleached white from the sun. There were no people, but in the field next to the house were brown goats with white ears and black feet. It was very quiet except for the goats munching grass and their bells ringing around their necks when they bent to take another bite. David knelt and grabbed a handful of grass, straining to try and reach a nearby goat. Her belly was swollen and grass stuck to her beard. She studied them carefully as she chewed. The lady goat was uninterested in David and the grass in his hand.

“I don’t imagine a bird in a cage would be very uplifting,” Jilly said.

“David, she doesn’t want your grass. Look how lovely and green the grass is that she has. Yours looks dead and wilted.”

“Bird in a cage?” Maggie asked.

“The canary at your college. I don’t imagine that would be very uplifting to a child who already feels trapped in a hospital. A canary in a cage would only make me more upset about being sick,” Jilly said. “I don’t think it does one good to feel trapped.”

“I don’t think so,” Maggie said. They did not know about Maggie’s time at the hospital or the boys. No one knew about the time in the hospital except those

that were around during those dark months. Jilly called to David that the goats hated him and she would, too, if they didn't get moving on their hike.

For dinner that night, they grilled fish and made green sauce to eat over it. Jilly showed Maggie how to pick the small pointed bones out of the fish and scrape the meat off the bigger ones. When she was finished, Jilly's plate looked like something that hung from a cartoon alley cat's mouth. They washed dishes with the window open and Paul Simon playing over the stereo system. David poured them more glasses of wine and opened the doors to the porch.

"With Bastille Day coming there should be fireworks from somewhere," he said fluffing pillows on the deck chairs.

"Will we be able to see them?" Maggie asked drying her hands on her shorts.

"Certainly. They shoot most of them from the boats," David said.

"And we don't have to get all in the hustle and bustle of crowds. Will you hand me the olive oil? Right there, yes, thank you," Jilly said closing cabinets. Maggie scraped crumbs off the counter and brushed her hands over the trashcan.

"I say we sit out there and hope someone is feeling festive," Jilly said with her hands on her hips.

"What do you think I am doing out here now, Jilly?" David asked from the porch.

"Pardon me. I didn't know you were already out there drinking alone," Jilly said turning off bright overhead lights.

“You aren’t ever drinking alone when you have been drinking with friends,” David said. Maggie sat in the chair farthest from him, leaving an open seat for Jilly. Maggie wondered if she should tell them about what she knew, what she had seen. She wondered if they would be off put by it, or appreciate that she opened up to them. Maggie couldn’t talk to anyone at the international college about it. She didn’t speak enough French or any other language to explain anything. There was a niece or cousin Maggie heard of that Jilly and David took in and tried to care for, and it didn’t go well. She considered this in telling them, then decided not to. She wanted to be remembered differently than what those stories would allow.

The town looked like tangled Christmas lights weaving in and out from the hills and down by the *River Loup*. Yachts made black lumps on the otherwise vast and smooth sea on their horizon.

“Sometimes I think we need a cat here,” David sighed.

“A cat?”

“Yes, just something to lie in the sun and wrap up at our feet when we sit like this,” David said.

“You have goats,” Maggie said.

“You know those goats up the hill don’t like me. A cat would love me,” David said.

“Yes, but he would be a rather neglected animal living out here,” Jilly said. David agreed, and said a bird might be better.

“Maybe we will get a bird box and hope something wants to come live with us,” Jilly said. “That way he is free to come and go.”

“That sounds very nice,” David said. They got quiet and looked out into the black in front of them. The first spark of fireworks shot in a green serpentine skeleton far from the house. Many followed after. The sound of the fireworks was delayed across the *Loup* so the lights exploded in bright silence, save the sound of goat bells up the hill.

## THE DUST YOU ARE

Abigail thought the dogs licked her because they loved her, but they were licking the coyote's blood from her fingers and where it had dripped on her neck. She rubbed their jowls while they slobbered on her forearms and elbows. Red patted Boone and Patches on the head, passing Abigail to walk into the garage. His back spurred when he bent to take his river shoes off and he leaned his fishing pole against the wall. He could smell lunch Kathleen was making for them through the door, sure the dogs could smell the bacon for the BLTs, too. He thought of the dogs' wet noses pressing against his knees under the table begging. Their wet noses were, at that time, pressed against Abigail's ass as she got her own fishing gear, shooing them from her privates and nudging them with her knees. Red picked at dried mud on the fishing pole, the coyote's blood turning like rust under his nails. Kathleen called from the other side of the door, but Red pretended not to hear. His groin and back ached and the time spent cutting the coyote from the wire hadn't helped.

"You need help?" Red called to Abigail.

“Nope. Will you see if Kathleen wants us to clean the fish or put them in the freezer? I need to hose off before I go inside. I’m filthy.”

“Just put them in the fridge for now. Boone, Patches, get over here.” The dogs bounded towards the door, leaving Abigail to handle the rest of the truck herself. She didn’t touch the trash bag the coyote was in. Red waited to see if she said something about the mess. A year ago he would have done the fishing trip with his friends. Two years ago, he would have done it with his father. They’d clean the fish and stay the night on the river. His father’s strokes and Red’s cancered prostate changed that. The strokes and dementia put Red’s father in a home and then in a bed. Soon enough after that, Red buried him. Now, Red was getting radioactive seeds injected in him to kill the cancer in his prostate so he could piss more than every couple of days.

When he told Kathleen the procedure they would do to get rid of the cancer she said, “Well, not only do you get to keep your balls but they might glow in the dark.” He made love to her then on the brown sofa in the study. The one that covered up the coffee stains when the dogs came running in from the snow and knocked the table over. She kissed his shoulder before she got up from the couch to bathe. The only light on was the tall green lamp next to the sofa. He lay there longer, after she got up, feeling her kiss on his skin. He looked at the wet smear on his shoulder. Red couldn’t recall the last time he had watched her walk away from him naked, before or after then. Maybe a glimpse of her changing before a morning walk, but he hadn’t seen his dick hard in months and his snoring had gotten so bad she mostly stayed in the guest bedroom.

“Mayonnaise?” Kathleen hollered. “Damn, Red, I’ve been shouting for an hour. Do you want mayonnaise? Where is Abigail?” Kathleen said opening the door to the



garage. Boone and Patches ran in and knocked into her legs and end tables in the hallway. She had on her faded yellow apron with BBQ and red wine stains. She was wearing make up, but the kitchen was hot and the menopause made her sweat. Even with his bad eyes he could see the chalky lines on her face where powder and foundation had smudged. She was still beautiful, but she didn't think it anymore so she didn't act it much, either. She used to answer his return with kissing, pulling at his fishing shirt. Even in their late forties, she would greet him with her body, wrapping limbs around him before he even got in the door. He remembered when she would go with him and the times they did it on secluded banks of rivers.

“No, no mayonnaise. Abigail's putting the fish away,” he pushed his foot out of the river shoes with his heels, knowing he was ruining the shape.

“Catch anything big?”

“Some. Bugs weren't out today.”

“Did Abigail have fun?” Kathleen took his vest from him, hanging it in the hall closet. He knew she saw his jaw tighten to remove it because the cartilage had worn down between his vertebrae and bones clipped against each other, making everything jolt through his creaking body.

“Yeah. We cut a coyote out of the wire though, down on the east side. Gotten itself tangled up there, died.”

“Jesus Christ, Red. You did that with Abigail there? What the hell is wrong with you? She doesn't need to be doing things like that. Cutting coyotes out of wire. My sister will kill me if she hears about that. Christ.”

Red opened the fridge and took his pills out, swallowing them without water, something Abigail said made the pills some percentage amount ineffective. He didn't want to have to reach around Kathleen to get water, though.

Abigail was spending the summer with them. She hadn't gotten the internship she wanted in Nashville where all her girlfriends were going. Kathleen offered their home as an alternative for the summer months. Abigail drove her old Volkswagon the thirty-hour drive to them in Montana and never complained a minute about the work she did around their house. She helped some of the neighbors, too. Other retired couples like Red and Kathleen were happy to have someone come check on their horses for them, even ride some. Red and Kathleen had been there long enough, Montana felt like home. But some of the other couples came out West for the life of cowboy luxury and ended up finding there was more work to be done because of freezing, long winters and upkeep of land took a lot out of them. Abigail often came home with homemade huckleberry pies or frozen elk sausage as payment for her work. She was just happy to be outside, she said, and kept on doing it.

"You're supposed to have those with water. Seriously, Red, you let her watch you mutilate that thing?"

"She helped, Kathleen. She wanted to help. She didn't cry or anything."

"Well not in front of you she won't. Martha is going to kill me."

"So don't tell her."

"I hope Abigail isn't out there calling her right now about how her uncle is a heartless animal killer."

“The damn thing was dead when we found it. We didn’t want bears, Kathleen. Ease up. She’s fine. She’s not twelve. She’s probably seen road kill that looked the same way.”

“But she doesn’t have to touch road kill, Red. God, you really don’t think sometimes,” Kathleen said and turned her back to him. She cut the BLTs on a diagonal, setting them on paper plates with chips and a pickle. He told her lunch looked good. She told him he was an idiot.

Red loved watching Kathleen cook. Their first date was at her house and she made chicken teriyaki and fried rice. For years, he’d sit behind her with a book before dinner. Since Abigail came, she would sit on the counter and talk to Kathleen or stand next to her at the stove and stir while Kathleen worked another pot or cut vegetables. The two looked similar from behind, same long legs and slim waist. Their buttocks high and round.

He knew men saw this in Abigail, when she went out with her friends at night or even passed the guys at the fishing lodge in her shorts. Men leaned on barstools and worked their bottom lip till it was red and wet and thought of his niece in the early hours of the morning. Red knew this the way all men knew, because she smelled like honeydew and still touched their forearms when she laughed.

Women Kathleen’s age had stopped flirting and touching. Some had stopped laughing. He knew friends of his screwed women who weren’t their wives when they went on trips. The kind of women who were there for men with prostate cancer and old backs, whose wives moved to other bedrooms and other hobbies. Red never did it. Not

since college when he went on a trip to New Orleans, and even then could only bring himself to ask for a lap dance in the dingy backroom his fraternity brother paid for. He lied to the other boys and said he came on her chest and they were proud, but he only felt sad and dirty when he left. The New Orleans girl had a tattoo of Snoopy on her inner thigh and never even smiled at him.

He married his first wife, Lynn, shortly after college because they'd been dating what seemed long enough and Red's grandmother left him her old ring. He proposed at her family's home after they came in from Christmas caroling. They divorced twelve years later. Lynn never remarried and never changed her last name, but they hadn't spoken since their youngest was married years ago. Red met Kathleen through a golfing friend. She felt soft and warm in comparison to Lynn's starchy, overly tidy life. Kathleen gardened and went on long walks. She'd teach herself new crafts and give them to her family members as loving homemade gifts, but not the tacky kind that got thrown away but that were treasured for their thoughtfulness.

Kathleen asked about eating the fish Abigail and Red caught over lunch. Kathleen used to cook and hang photographs in antique frames, over the years she became fussy and things like grilling fish had to be planned out hours in advance and argued about.

"Do you want to do that tonight or later this week? I have my card game tomorrow night. Abigail, are you going to play with us?"

"If y'all don't play bridge," she dropped a chip to the dogs lying by her feet. Red could hear their slobbery mouths licking at the ground where it had been.

“Heavens no, we don’t play bridge. You think I could remember how to play that? Do you want to cook the fish tonight?” Kathleen turned to Red. He nodded.

“I need to shower,” Abigail said.

“Y’all are both pretty stinky,” Kathleen laughed. “Now, was he helpful or did he make you do everything on your own?”

“That’s the dogs that smell. No, he was great. I messed up casting some, but I’ve gotten better. I’m not catching near as many bushes as I was before.” Red smiled out of one side of his mouth, chewing his sandwich on the other.

Kathleen and the doctors said he wasn’t allowed to go out on the river or in the woods without someone else there while he was still doing the procedures. His friends felt uncomfortable with a fishing pole in one hand and a twenty-year-old girl on the other side of the river, bird nesting her line and catching nothing. The ones who did have children had grown up in a generation of men who never held babies and gave their sons guns for Christmas. Those who didn’t have children had spent their time getting high and comparing stories about Vietnam and Korea in the woods. Abigail would have never been allowed to come fishing if Red’s father had been alive. The incontinent old man would have said she slowed them down and her female organ was bad luck for fish.

“She’s getting better,” Red said.

“So fish for tonight, then?” Kathleen asked, clearing their plates.

“Sure. We can grill the corn and I can make that salsa. I am going to check on the horses,” Abigail said. She finished the milk from her glass and picked up Red’s empty cup and brought them to the sink.

“Thanks, sweetpea,” Kathleen smiled at her. Red stayed at the table and Abigail slipped on her boots and walked out the door.

“You feeling okay?” Kathleen looked at him from the window reflection over the sink.

“ Sure.”

“You need to shower.” She loaded the dishwasher.

“Yeah.”

“And can you make sure we have all the stuff for the grill tonight? I don’t want to have to send Abigail back out to get some.”

“I can get it.”

“Red, just check if we have everything,” Kathleen dried her hands and walked to the guest bedroom. The dogs shifted their eyes watching Kathleen leave and Red remain at the table. Boone’s tail made low thudding plops on the slate floor.

They had gone rafting the weekend before. They, Red and Abigail, not Red and Abigail and Kathleen. One of the green boats needed a patch over a hole and the oars were too long and heavy for Abigail the last time the three of them went down the river, so they stopped at a rafting store a county over to get new oars. Red and Abigail wanted to try a new river, so they drove two hours away to the mouth of the Yellowstone. Abigail was sleepy and quiet at first, but by the time they found the raft store she was upbeat and chatty. She went a few aisles over to get a new dry bag. Red explained to the man behind the cash register about the oars and the patch.

“My wife should be coming around the corner in a minute with a new dry bag, we’ll just ring it all up together.” Red didn’t know why he called Abigail his wife. His throat felt tight and dry after he said it, he waited for the man to look at him funny.

“That’s fine. I’ll just keep the card open if you want to go check on that patch. Someone is getting the oars from the back,” the man said, unphased. Red mumbled a thank you. He didn’t go back in the store, but waited squinting in the sun by the car. Abigail carried the oars and the dry bag on her own, struggling a bit, but making it. She didn’t say anything about him not helping her get all the stuff. She probably assumed he wasn’t feeling great. Red was sure the cashier would refer to him as her husband, and waited for Abigail to comment on awkwardly correcting him. But she didn’t say anything. She sat in the car with one leg bent up by her ear, the other on the ground, and drummed her fingers on the top of her knee. The geography of the position made Red desperate to keep his eyes on the road.

In the evening, the den was warm from the late sun. Abigail’s hair was wet from her shower and dampened her shirt around her shoulders and back. They cleaned the fish and were waiting to grill them when the potatoes were closer to boiling. Kathleen was in the garden picking rosemary to put on the potatoes and season the fish. Abigail read a book and Red pretended to zone out past Kathleen, but watched her in the ridiculous straw hat and green gardening gloves. She squeezed the tomatoes and checked their backsides for bugs. She was in a better mood since Red had gotten rid of the coyote body. Abigail didn’t say anything about it. She checked on the horses and

played with the dogs, but hadn't said anything much since lunch. He regretted letting her see that, letting her help him cut back the flesh around the lolling head and knock it from the barbed wire. She had looked away when she held open the trash bag Red put the body in, its blood dripping on her. But it was too late and she was reading now and Kathleen was waving in the garden. Red wanted to kiss Kathleen's crows' feet, wanted to hold her enough that he got up to go to the other side of the window and check tomatoes with her.

He turned to say something to Abigail, but her head lay to the side and her eyes were shut. Her mouth was open a little. Not enough to drool or snore, just a little break in between the pink of her lips. He watched Abigail, remembering what it felt like to watch his own daughter, Lynn and Red's middle child, as she slept when she was an infant. She had been colicky and the few hours she did sleep, his first wife moaned and wandered to the bedroom. Red stared at his daughter and willed her to love him. She turned out to have a lot more of her mother's genetics than Red's and after the divorce they rarely spoke. Years later she called him from a hospital phone to tell him she had a boy. She called again when she needed money to pay for his private pre-school when he got kicked out of the public one for discipline problems. Red didn't understand how a kid could misbehave so badly in pre-school that they got kicked out. He told her he didn't have the money and she told him he was a horse's ass and hung up.

Abigail made a small noise. Like the grunting of a puppy as it lifts its swollen belly off the floor in search of its mother's milk. He just looked out the window at Kathleen and the tomatoes. There was a cardinal on the aspen tree. The cardinal, steadying himself, watched Red and Abigail for a moment. He tilted his head. Deciding



they were not of any danger to him, he bit the head off the black beetle that he was holding in his foot.